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Bandidos Mexicano

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Bandidos Mexicano

Abstract

Twin day sounded like an innocent enough theme for Homecoming spirit week at a high school. It was just people wearing matching clothes, taking some pictures, and laughing a bit.

But that day, six girls walked to class in bright ponchos, giant sombreros, and stick-on mustaches, wielding fake green cards to boot. They were followed by a seventh with “Border Patrol” scrawled in black marker on a sign taped to her back. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Aladdin, Border Patrol, cultural appropriation, high school, Homecoming, Media, Pocahontas, Race, racism, Redskins, spirit week, yearbook

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Latina/o Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

Bandidos Mexicano

[February 29, 2016](#)

Twin day sounded like an innocent enough theme for Homecoming spirit week at a high school. It was just people wearing matching clothes, taking some pictures, and laughing a bit.



But that day, six girls walked to class in bright ponchos, giant sombreros, and stick-on mustaches, wielding fake green cards to boot. They were followed by a seventh with “Border Patrol” scrawled in black marker on a sign taped to her back.

My father was born in Mexico City; he came to the United States legally in his 20s, where he met and married my mother and where he lived until his death. I find it troubling that I feel the need to say that he immigrated legally as justification for my father’s presence in the country he called home for most of his life, when American media perpetuates assumptions of illegality in Hispanic immigrants at every turn. Though I didn’t grow up in Mexico, I am still a product of my heritage and I have the name to go along with it.

I don’t blame the girls. I do think what they did was wrong, and really did hurt, but they didn’t know. They didn’t know it was offensive because no one ever told them that mocking an entire culture was wrong. They didn’t know that misappropriating traditions was wrong. They didn’t know that making light of manhunts for illegal immigrants was wrong. They didn’t know that ridiculing people who are striving to legally move to another country to make a better future for themselves was wrong.

They didn’t know that it would hurt me to see people that I identify with made into a caricature.

They were failed by the culture of the United States, which told them that making fun of ethnic groups is okay by having a football team named the “Redskins,” making a movie in which a character, Aladdin, sings about his “barbaric” homeland, and the general mess that is *Pocahontas*. These images and words surround us, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices to children across the United States. We can’t expect racial and religious stereotypes to end when we broadcast them to the nation.

I'm not saying that the mixture of cultures is inherently bad; appropriation isn't necessarily [negative](#). What is problematic is when aspects of a minority culture are taken completely out of their original context, corrupted, or used purely for aesthetics rather than as an extension of the originating culture that shows appreciation for their purposes and meanings. The wrongful appropriation of cultures misrepresents peoples, dehumanizes them, devalues the problems they face, and is painful.

The incident at my high school could have been a learning moment, with school administrators helping the girls understand how their actions can hurt others and, on a larger scale, a school-wide conversation about becoming more sensitive to these issues could have been held. But that isn't what happened. It was ignored on the day of; no one said anything. The girls weren't reprimanded and no action was taken. In fact, I didn't even know that it had happened until May of the next year, when we got our yearbooks and I found a picture, centered and larger than the rest on the page, of these girls dressed up mocking my ethnicity.

Now the failing was two-fold. Not only had the girls failed to act sensitively, but the yearbook committee, and by extension the school, had promoted this act of cultural violence. After discovering the photo, my friends and I worked to make our feelings and opinions known, and the story was picked up by the [local news](#).

Soon it had spread much wider and was now being shown on [national](#) and [international](#) news websites. The girls were finally talked to about why what they did was wrong and hurtful, but I have to question the fact that it took news reports to inspire such an obvious action. Further, the yearbooks weren't changed, as they had already all been printed. We were all left with books that were meant to celebrate our happiest times in school, but instead held a snapshot of a painful moment.

I know that what's done cannot be changed, and I won't accuse the girls of being racist, but I implore you to pay attention to how you interact with cultures that are not your own. I am not a victim in this- I don't want your sympathy- I want your help. Consider outside perspectives and the value people place in their heritage and traditions when you're dressing up in costume or making jokes, don't sit idle and watch as media invalidates peoples, and think about whether your actions might cause pain.

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